

Liberating Theology: Salem Bland and the Emergence of a Radical Christianity

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Richard Allen, *The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

It would be an understatement to acclaim this book as one of the most significant studies yet written in Canadian cultural history. Not only has Allen selected as his subject a man who was preternaturally sensitive to the currents and counter-currents in Victorian culture and society, but he makes Bland, later to be one of the most renowned of Canada's left-wing Protestant preachers and thinkers, come alive as a three-dimensional, complicated person. In contrast to some accounts depicting Canadian Protestantism's equanimity in the face of evolutionary science, Allen, who in 1973 in *The Social Passion: Religion and social reform in Canada 1914-28* defined the "Social Gospel" for a generation of Canadian historians, now reveals a deeply troubled religious world — and a man who braved heresy trials and public censure to speak out on some of the most sensitive doctrinal issues in the nineteenth-century Ontario Methodist universe.

Allen deftly identifies the emergent late-Victorian intellectual contradiction: "The problem in 1890... was that the science of the real world whether of nature, history, or biblical studies had bypassed and now challenged the mix of Baconian method, Newtonian law, and biblical absolutism most contemporary Canadian evangelicals, even the more forward-looking, had incorporated in their world view. In the upshot, the new sciences, when applied to the biblical record, found themselves ranged against an established mindset that could only be called a new scholasticism" (128). There would be heresy trials in the 1890s — including one plausibly held to have hastened its victim's demise — for those who went too far in embracing modernism in the face of the new sciences. In setting out to define and defy his historical moment, Bland was especially excited by one great idea "that leapt out of Darwin and Spencer alike," i.e., "that the whole of life was organic and in process" (174). In field after field — sociology (Comte), theology (Drummond), political economy (George), economic history (Toynbee), philosophy (Watson) — we find Bland gravitating towards the intellectuals of a new evolutionary paradigm.

Beyond affording us the pleasure of recapturing the intellectual debates from a revolutionary period in transatlantic cultural history, *The View from Murney Tower* also provides us with a much sharper sense of how many sensed in these vast oceanic tides not the excitement of adventure but the prospect of general ruin — i.e., the capsizing of the cherished concepts and categories they

held most dear, God and His Creation central among them. If one posted “no objection” to the “abandonment of special creation and the fixity of species” (174), if one argued in evolutionary terms for a progressive “revelation” through time, if one identified the achievements of secular science as so many welcome unfoldings of history’s dialectic — it perhaps became less and less clear what problem the concept of “God” still solved.

Allen describes a sermon Bland preached in 1889 on “The Mysteriousness of God and Destiny,” in which Bland proclaimed God unknowable:

Pious men and women in all ages, he said, ‘have been in danger of constructing God to the compass of their finite knowledge. They have thought with their babel-bricks of high sounding titles—‘Infinite Creator, Almighty Sovereign, Gracious Father’—to build a tower by which they could mount to Heaven and behold the Infinite One face to face. They have mapped out His nature and defined all His attributes.’ But the great attempt to objectify God had backfired and modern agnosticism had come to declare God both unknown and unknowable. Salem urged his listeners to recite after him, ‘We thank thee, Huxley, for teaching us that word.’ ...[That] ‘God is unknown and unknowable, so far from being a recent and formidable heresy, is the declaration of God’s own word... ‘Canst thou by searching find out God?’ (5)

Drawing from Raymond Fancher’s comments in an interesting piece on evolutionary “secular religions” in Victorian England, which can be found in a collection on *The Transformation of Psychology* edited by Marlene Shore among others, we might underline Bland’s intellectual audacity at this moment. Huxley’s agnosticism, which Fancher presents as a critique of *both* materialism and spiritualism, was one of the scandals of the age: as Huxley wrote to one Christian correspondent, “I am quite as ready to admit your doctrine that souls secrete bodies as I am the opposite one that bodies secrete souls—simply because I deny the possibility of obtaining any evidence as to the truth or falsehood of either hypothesis. My fundamental axiom of speculative philosophy is that *materialism and spiritualism are opposite poles of the same absurdity*—the absurdity of imagining that we know anything about either spirit or matter.”¹ Huxley here was plainly drawing upon Herbert Spencer, whose pivotal religious concept of the “Unknowable” was (via the mediation of George Henry Lewes) rooted in Spinoza’s *Ethics*.² Like so many radicals and socialists of his era, Bland was obviously trawling in Spencerian waters. The extent to which Bland relied upon Spencer’s evolutionary theory becomes jaw-droppingly clear when, in early-twentieth-century arguments for Protestant church union, the Protestant Preacher relied overtly on the Scientific Sociologist to develop arguments for such a “United Church” in Canada, on the pages of the *Christian Guardian*, no less (331)! This evidence is pure gold for those of us who had long suspected, but only suspected, that argu-

ments for the United Church, like those for the One Big Union and indeed the One Big Empire, were often directly influenced by Spencerian evolutionary sociology.

One question remained in my mind when I put down this breathtakingly invigorating book, and it was about the definition, characteristics, and trajectory of liberal theology. Liberalism is a notoriously slippery word, which, transposed from one context to another, shifts in its meaning. (This is all the more reason for scholars to insist on a fairly rigorous and economical definition of it). Nineteenth-century Canada, governed since Confederation by Liberal Conservatives and then by the only somewhat different Liberals, was plainly a Dominion shaped by people who took liberalism very seriously. And Allen shows us a Salem Bland who conformed to his time and place in drinking deeply from the well of liberal certainties. Writing of a speech about Canada as a democratic country, in which Bland proclaimed that “[n]ational prosperity and national destiny alike [are] determined by personal character,” Allen acutely remarks: “It was essentially the speech of an educated, evangelical, mid-Victorian liberal with its emphasis on politics as education, electors voting, not by party, but by conscience and evidence, and social reform accomplished through the accumulation of individual character” (100).

One can readily see the elective affinities between this conventional mid-nineteenth-century political-economic liberalism, so persuasively explored by such classic historians as Creighton, Careless and Cook, and above all by the incomparable J.B. Brebner, and the nonconformist tradition of religious individualism found in Methodism. Liberals in both spheres placed (somewhat differently conceived) figures of the individual at the heart of their conceptions of the world. Just as the individual entrepreneur was captain of his enterprise, the individual Christian was captain of his spiritual destiny, responsible for having Christ reign in his individual heart. My question, then, is: was liberal theology meshed with, or in inherent conflict with, the broader imperatives of liberal state formation? Mindful of the pitfalls of any form of class reductionism applied to religion, how should we theorize what would seem plainly to be a kind of transposition of liberal categories from one sphere to another? Did religion figure centrally as part of liberal hegemony, and in what precise ways?

Allen works to distinguish Salem Bland's liberalism from that of his father, a disciple of Cobden and Bright. For such older liberals, “the new currents of thought that dominated the late century (the new biology, the new science of sociology, positivism, socialism, the higher criticism, and the spirit of skepticism they seemed to engender) were so threatening” (391). For a thinker of Bland's stripe, liberalism meant recognition of “the new light such emerging perspectives threw on the vast panorama of nature, history, and the human condition. And he was liberal because, in the course of all that, he had gained an new appreciation of the role of reason and the human imagination as mediators of

any genuine religious experience. Christianity, he had concluded, could not march into the coming century oblivious to the word God was speaking through the new thinking and the new social movements of the time" (391). On this reading, Bland's liberalism was akin to liberal free thought, but distanced from liberal free trade.

Allen remarks, of Henry George's immense impact on Bland: "Certainly, the direction in which George pressed him is clear: away from older individual evangelical to more social explanations of poverty, away from political economy's separation of economics from religion and ethics and toward a biblical radicalism declaring that no one other than God holds title to land, sea, or air, toward a labour theory and social understanding of economic value, and toward an acceptance of government intervention in the economy in the name of social justice" (110). Yet it seems to me that for all his apparent iconoclasm, Bland down to the mid-1890s stoutly resisted going very far in this direction. The notion that "no one other than God holds title to land, sea or air," consistently acted upon, would surely have required Bland to effect a dramatic break with wealthy Methodists who proclaimed titles of ownership over a vast diversity of things, labour-power as a commodity most crucially.

The "breakthrough" to a new way of seeing came in Cornwall in 1896, when Bland, responding to economic depression in the factory town, to the Idealism of John Watson (influential in having Bland drop his earlier insistence on the primacy of individual over social salvation), and to the vivid image of the "larger Christ" articulated by George D. Herron, developed a conception of "A New Christianity" (241). As Allen presents it, Bland drew upon Paul's Christology "to overcome the reigning dualism of much Christian thinking and arrive at an integrated view of his universe" (239):

Rightly understood, the Incarnation of Christ in Jesus entailed the destruction of the great antithesis of matter and spirit which had been the nightmare of Christianity, splitting the world in two, denigrating the body and material existence and sending the faith on a frantic chase for some spiritual essence. Now modern scientists, like Paul, conceived the universe not as dead matter but as everywhere alive. The life of Jesus was simply the expression in human form of the spirit of self-giving love which animated all things. (239)

In essence, this was a dialectical Christology, parallel in some surprising respects to Lukácsian Marxism, within which the revolutionary proletariat rather than the revolutionary theologian would work to abolish this deadening dualism. Allen's dazzling text makes it clear that Bland's revolution in thought was complexly over determined by forces theological, scientific, and social: by the rise of the higher criticism and critical historiography, by the transformation of first natural and then social sciences by theories of evolution, and by the St. Lawrence Valley's transition to industrial capitalism. "In diverse ways the Protestant hegemony was being challenged," he argues and a "genuine undercurrent of disorien-

tation” was “driving a quest for a new or reaffirmed identity” (82). Both liberal theology and the rise of fundamentalism can be grasped as ways of wrestling with the challenge of modernity.

In Canada, the largest single denomination was (and remains) the Roman Catholic Church, which in Québec maintained an institutional ‘state within the state,’ was obliged by papal decree in 1864 to forswear liberalism and modernity, and operated impressive networks of hospitals, schools, and missions. For me, the demographic and cultural centrality of Catholicism has always made it difficult to assent to Allen’s term “Protestant hegemony” as a general term for the Canadian project in general, especially if we mean by hegemony an achieved and durable equilibrium in power relations. It seems to me that “Catholic hegemony” is an equally apt description of some of the most important societies and territories making up a heterogeneous country; and that an expansive and *contested* Protestant/Catholic hegemony might be a suitable way of describing much of the Canadian North and many of the larger cities, such as Saint John, Montreal, and Toronto, from the 1820s to the 1950s. A huge challenge confronting those constructing and defending the project of Canada was to channel the formidable cultural resources of the two main forms of Christianity into projects that sustained the liberal order as a whole. A top-down application of a coercive strategy of Protestant hegemony ran the risk of undermining the project of liberal order altogether, insofar as the compromise of Confederation required the active consent of the Catholic Church, exercising many of the functions of the state, particularly (but not only) in Québec. (And subsequent exceptional efforts to do so, in Prohibition and in Conscription, confirmed the rule). That many Victorian Canadians surely saw their country as “God’s Dominion” does not mean that they construed either God or the Dominion in the same ways. Orangemen and ultramontanes, unlettered farmers in Ontario and highly sophisticated Sulpicians in Montreal somehow had to be incorporated in a more general social and political order—if not in a deeply binding consensus, at least in the more modest ways that allowed a stable and profitable liberal dominion to take its place within the North Atlantic world, as a *de jure* British dominion and a *de facto* condominium of Great Britain and the United States.

On this reading, both religious communities struggled against each other, and within the bosom of a single state, for hegemony. In both cases, we find relatively small groups of intellectuals first articulating programs pertinent to relatively small groups, which they then seek to transcend by expanding them to much wider strata—a process that often entailed the reformulation of the program with this wider base in mind. Yet, although both major religious formations ultimately created state-like religious institutions, although both were central to the primary state project of subjugating and recoding pre-existing native societies, and although both constructed for their followers formidable zones of certainty, neither was capable of removing its competitor. Here was an

inherently conflictual and complicated landscape a real-world politician — and any religious thinker aspiring to have a discernible impact on Canada in general — neglected at his or her peril.

In short, on this reading, the Dominion was never Protestant nor Catholic, neither in the superficial and obvious demographic sense nor in the more profound cultural way sometimes seemingly implied by visionary intellectuals like Bland. It was, rather, an awkward and often conflictual combination of the two. Neither side could win the country through a “war of manoeuvre” — the dramatic seizure of state power (although, arguably, prohibition, conscription and Ontario’s Regulation XVII at the time of the First World War came perilously close). Both, rather, had to wage a protracted “war of position,” a “reciprocal siege” of each other’s certainties — one which, if conducted improperly and indelicately, raised state-menacing dangers. In neither case can we speak of an “achieved hegemony,” but rather of “struggles for hegemony.” What remained *hegemonic* in an achieved, dominion-wide sense was the liberal framework, the outcome of the historic compromise of the 1840s-1860s, which allowed adherents of irreconcilable religious cultures to engage in mutually advantageous activities in the political and social world.

Herein lies for me the fascinating complication of “liberal theology” as developed by Bland, and superbly illuminated in this book, which — paradoxically enough — gradually acquired the character of an ever-radicalizing critique of Victorian “liberal political economy.” Bland critiqued the conventional pieties of the mid-nineteenth-century British liberals; he broke with conventional liberal commonsense in praising Canada as a “democratic country” (100); he sympathized with Single Tax and labour movements: all of these were ways of “living the faith” by jolting his hearers out of a “false compartmentalizing of religion and life that was abetted by the excessive inwardness that had overtaken large parts of the Protestant religious tradition” (79). Was there also in him a sense that, without such a jolt, the forces of progressive Protestantism might lose out in the struggle for religious hegemony?

Perhaps these reflections have some bearing on one fascinating point in this book that I felt Allen left underexplored, and that was Salem Bland’s passionate endorsement of the doctrine that the “Anglo-Saxon race” had become (in his words) “the chief instrument in the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth” (305). Bland, exceeding in this respect even the Imperial Federationist enthusiasms of many of his contemporaries, hoped that this supposed race would be united through “a representative central council and systematic financial support for diplomatic and military services. Ultimately an alliance with the United States and a common citizenship of English-speaking peoples should follow” (305). Why this embrace of an imagined transatlantic racial state? As Allen plausibly argues, many contemporary Canadians were doing the same thing: there was a war in South Africa that, in their eyes, confirmed

British ideals; they were swept up in the amazing spectacles of imperial Jubilees; they were, many of them, of recently-arrived British stock; some of them could even (over Herbert Spencer's staunchly anti-imperialist objections) conceptualize the Empire as a further organic "evolutionary" advance over disorganized and supposedly primitive "homogeneities." Yet could we not also add, in Bland's case and others, that this imagined turn to an entirely new and racialized state structure might also have represented a resolution of the deep-seated dilemmas of the Dominion's perpetually divided politics? Is it not plausible that intellectuals who had survived the envenomed religious debates of the 1880s and 1890s might have glimpsed in this new imagined community a sort of "Hail Mary" pass (if we may use that expression for Protestants) that would finally settle the question of religious (and "racial") hegemony? If the Dominion of Canada was forever unlikely to be the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant country such thinkers dreamed of, might they not alternatively imagine an Anglo-Saxon Protestant Empire, with the unavoidable French Canadians and Catholics now in a much smaller, even irrelevant minority — all under the symbolic leadership of a monarchy which, even to our own time of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is open only to Protestants of a very particular sort?

In stimulating these and other questions, this book is a landmark in Canadian history. It brims with life — with Bland's enthusiasm for the vast books he read, with the cut-and-thrust of debate within his Church—and especially with eye-opening descriptions of the communities that shaped him. Allen breathes life even into some of the sleepest of Ontario cities — recovering the turbulent legacy of the Knights of Labor in Cornwall, and (even more surprisingly) a veritable nest of revolutionaries in Kingston, whose Murney Tower gives the book its title and one of its most memorable images.

Was it the structure itself, so simple, so perfect in design? Each stone so complete in itself, yet so much a part of the larger whole. Each one a thought that once had the undivided attention of a master stonemason, for a time a reflection of a life, of morning porridge and midday bread and cheese poured into its execution, of children's greetings, the heat of bodies intertwined in bed, yes, the pain of loss, the too common deaths of infants—the tower was at once a solid monument and an ethereal assembly of living moments (95).

Thanks to neo-liberalism, until 2008 the seemingly all-powerful common sense of our era — and reports of its demise are, alas, probably much exaggerated — Spencerian sociology has attained a secret second life, in the form of Hayek's and Friedman's extreme economic philosophies, the hidden transcripts underlying a myriad of newspaper editorials and television broadcasts. Spencerism has always contained a contradiction: that is, evolutionary processes of increasing complexity and integration (think, in our day, of the global ecological catastrophe and of the planetary economic meltdown) can hardly be managed effectively by rugged individuals dominating severely limited governments. Insofar as this

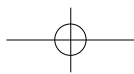
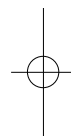
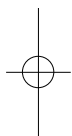
vast organism of interconnections and relations might be managed at all, it could only be by something like a brain-like collectivity, working to regulate its reciprocal relationships with a dynamic natural world. As Bland might have said, “any approach to social problems now had to reckon with the fundamental prospects of humanity in the light of evolutionary science” (144). In some ways, we today confront the *fin-de-siècle* all over again. As in the 1890s, the economic and environmental disasters traceable to individualism are all too visible. What is obviously *necessary* — i.e., the complete transformation of material relations linking members of the species to each other and to the rest of the natural world — also seems, in the absence of a coherent political agent, obviously *impossible*. Lacking the “strength of consequences” when we ponder this dilemma, many of us revert almost unconsciously to the hegemonic individualistic ideologies whose contradictions lie at the origins of our dilemmas.

Confronted by a like quandary, Bland counseled his co-religionists not to burrow ever deeper into their certainties, but to engage actively in a reconnaissance of the new science and the new social theory of their time — and to have this strength of consequences, the strength to face up to the practical implications of their discoveries. Those struggling with such contradictions in the 1890s needed (to quote Richard Allen) “a history of the origins and driving forces of the industrial system to feed an intelligent critique and appropriate solutions and, in the light of that, some well-informed visionings of alternative economic structures and social systems better attuned to the moral conscience and spiritual heritage of the country” (161). Not for Bland a jejune point-scoring against “human reasoning powers” (187) — a parallel in our own time would be the last three decades of anti-Enlightenment irrationalism, hyper-theorized versions of conventional liberalism deceptively marketed in the academy as the latest words in “subversion”. Rather, his situation called for a respectful and critical reconnaissance of the Enlightenment’s achievements. “The point of life is to sail the ocean” (398) — here is the liberating message of Murney Tower, of Salem Bland, and of Richard Allen, who in writing a stirring book about an intrepid explorer of the “late Victorian controversies” has also said something richly suggestive about the roiling seas of our own *fin de siècle*.

NOTES

¹Raymond E. Fancher, “Eugenics and Other Victorian ‘Secular Religions,’” in Christopher Green, Marlene Shore, and Thomas Teo, eds., *The Transformation of Psychology: Influences of 19th-Century Philosophy, Technology and Natural Science* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001), 8.

² Note Bernard Lightman, *The origins of agnosticism: Victorian unbelief and the limits of knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).



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